

James Cameron's 'Avatar' restores a sense of wonder to moviegoing that's been missing.

Kenneth Turan, *The Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 2009

- 1 Think of "Avatar" as "The Jazz Singer" of 3-D filmmaking. Think of it as the most expensive and accomplished Saturday matinee movie ever made. Think of it as the ultimate James Cameron production. Whatever way you choose to look at it, "Avatar's" shock and awe demand to be seen. You've never experienced anything like it, and neither has anyone else.
- 2 Say what you like about writer-director Cameron -- and take it from me, people have -- he has always been a visionary in terms of film technology, as his pioneering computer-generated effects in "The Abyss" and "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" testify. He is not a
- 3 director you want to underestimate, and with "Avatar's" story of futurist adventures on a moon called Pandora, he restores a sense of wonder to the moviegoing experience that has been missing for far too long.
- 4 An extraordinary act of visual imagination, "Avatar" is not the first of the new generation of 3-D films, just as "Jazz Singer" was not the first time people had spoken on screen. But like the Al Jolson vehicle, it's the one that's going to energize audiences about the full potential of this medium.
- 5 That's because to see "Avatar" is to feel like you understand filmmaking in three dimensions for the first time. In Cameron's hands, 3-D is not the forced gimmick it's often been, but a way to create an alternate reality and insert us so completely and seamlessly into it that we feel like we've actually been there, not watched it on a screen. If taking pleasure in spectacle and adventure is one of the reasons you go to the movies, this is something you won't want to miss.
- 6 A total immersion accomplishment like that did not come easily or for that matter, cheaply: 2,000 people worked on the project for three years and estimates of "Avatar's" budget put it in the neighborhood of \$300 million.
- 7 Cameron began thinking about the film 15 years ago and had to wait until either his company or someone else's invented the numerous technologies and cameras, often too complicated to describe easily, that turned his vision into a reality.
- 8 It's not only in 3-D that "Avatar" makes great strides, it's also in refining a technology called motion capture, which involves filming actors wearing sensors and then running the result through CGI computers. It's been used with varying degrees of success with Gollum's role in "The Lord of the Rings" and "Polar Express." Cameron's version, which he's renamed "performance capture," has been used to take the inhabitants of Pandora, 10-foot-tall creatures with yellow cat's eyes, long tails and blue translucent skin called the Na'vi, and make them appear as completely real as the film's human characters.
- 9 Perhaps the most surprising thing about Cameron's visual accomplishments is that they are so powerful we're barely troubled by the same weakness for flat dialogue and obvious characterization that put such a dent in "Titanic." Those qualities are here, all right, no mistake about that, but perhaps because of the power of the visuals, the strangeness of the science fiction world and the fact that many of the characters are Na'vi and not human, it doesn't feel like they matter as much. The film's romantic protagonists paradoxically end up feeling like creatures whose fates we care more about than we did Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet's on the boat.

- 10 "Avatar" is definitely not into breaking new narrative ground, but its ability to balance a familiar story with groundbreaking visuals is potent enough that even at an overly long 2 hours and 40 minutes this is a film people will be seeing more than once. Perhaps most unexpected of all, "Avatar" is surprisingly enlivened by all the seeming contradictions it brazenly puts together.
- 11 At one and the same time this film is a boys' adventure tale with a major romantic element, an anti-imperialism movie that gets considerable mileage out of depicting invading armies, a neo-pagan, anti-technology film that touts the healing powers of nature but is up to its neck in the latest gizmos and gadgets. It's a bundle of contradictions but James Cameron, clearly, wouldn't have it any other way.

"Avatar": Dances with aliens Stephanie Zacharek, *Salon.com*, December 18, 2009

- 1 While there are certain technical effects in James Cameron's "Avatar" that aren't quite like anything we've ever seen before, the movie is hardly a historical event, or even a grand achievement. It *is* a very expensive-looking, very flashy entertainment, albeit one that groans under the weight of clumsy storytelling in the second half and features some of the most godawful dialogue this side of "Attack of the Clones."
- 2 "Avatar" would be great fun, if only Cameron -- the picture's writer, director, producer and editor -- had a sense of humor about himself, which he clearly doesn't. Instead Cameron has to make it clear he's addressing grand themes: Characters must prove their bravery, their humility *and* their sensitivity to indigenous peoples. Like those "revolutionary" westerns directors kept making in the early '70s, or like the later "Dances With Wolves," "Avatar" is Cameron's "Let's be fair to the Indians" movie. And while Cameron's political stand is solidly liberal, this isn't a picture fleshed out with deep, multifaceted ideas. Cameron is less a sage than a canny bonehead. Characters signal their motives and intentions with thundering dialogue, mouthed by the actors in ways that suggest the guy at the top has a tin ear.
- 3 "Avatar," as its press notes announce, is designed to "deliver a fully immersive cinematic experience of a new kind, where the revolutionary technology invented to make the film disappears into the emotion of the characters and the sweep of the story." That word "immersive" means that you're not just watching "Avatar" -- you're soaking in it. The movie was made, and is designed to be seen, in 3-D, and no matter what anyone tries to tell you, the technology and not the story is the big selling point here: If a less famous director had made the exact same story with a bunch of actors in blue latex, ticket sales wouldn't be going through the roof. And if the technology is as revolutionary as Cameron has been claiming isn't it disingenuous for the publicity to turn around and suggest that we're really not supposed to notice it? In "Avatar," the technology is everything.
- 4 And it does, at least, amount to *something*. Whatever the flaws of "Avatar" may be, Cameron does use performance-capture more effectively than any filmmaker has yet, and that includes el-creepo performance-capture high priest Robert Zemeckis, whose "Polar Express" has served as the basis for many of my recurring Santa-driven nightmares. The Na'vis are intriguingly designed: Their faces, with their elongated almond eyes, resemble the faun in Guillermo del Toro's "Pan's Labyrinth." They wear their hair in long braids that end in a cluster of tentacles with nerve endings; these anemones can be plugged into the tails of various forest creatures, forming a kind of natural circuit. When Jake, as he's being schooled in Na'vi hunting techniques by Neytiri, mounts a magnificent flying beastie, he's not just riding it, he's communing with it. Cameron and his team have managed to come up with some lovely, fanciful details. I was particularly taken with the delicacy of the movie's color palette, especially for such a flashy, big-budget crowd pleaser. At one point Jake, exploring the wonders of a Pandora rain forest, comes upon funnel-like mushrooms that shrink away from his touch and disappear, shyly, into the earth. Their color is an earthy, translucent pinkish-red, in a tone that takes more thought and consideration than the bright, hothouse color another filmmaker might have automatically gone for.
- 5 The midsection of "Avatar," in which Jake discovers Pandora's glorious flora and fauna, has

some lyricism. But in the last third, when the tanks and helicopters start moving in, the picture begins to look no more innovative than a sophisticated computer game. Cameron's message may be strictly antiwar, but the second half of his movie relies on the brutalities of combat to whip up excitement. There's another problem with making a two-and-a-half-hour long 3-D feature, one that has nothing to do with pacing: 3-D movies aren't more realistic than 2-D movies; they're hyperrealistic, which means they're more physically demanding to watch, and eyestrain is no filmmaker's friend.

- 6 You can make dumb dialogue work if you're serving up a classic Saturday matinee-style entertainment. But if you're out to change the face of filmmaking, you have to work much harder at a lot of the things Cameron just shrugs off. You need well-rounded characters, and a great story that, even if it follows a familiar template, illuminates some angle of human experience in a fresh way.